



AN APPEAL

TO THE

PEOPLE OF ILLINOIS,

ON THE

QUESTION

OF A

CONVENTION.

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BY MORRIS BIRKBECK.  
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AN APPEAL, &c.

*Fellow Citizens;*

THE framers of our social compact, profiting by the experience of all nations, to secure from light and capricious changes those institutions of Government, which, on account of their superior importance, are coupled with first principles and embodied in the constitution, did most wisely ordain that the solemn measure of a convention should not be proposed to the people by any authority short of a majority of two-thirds of the general assembly.—We are invited to vote on this subject, at the next election, by a very different sort of majority from that intended by the constitution, and framed after a new fashion, which it will be right for us to examine before we give it our countenance. The history of the business appears to be, shortly, this—

Certain members of that body, anxious to introduce a forbidden system amongst us, formed themselves into a junto or caucus soon after the commencement of the session, and offered to other members their votes in favour of any proposition which those members had an interest in carrying, in consideration of their pledging themselves to support the measure of a convention. By the accession of these, their first victims, the caucus became, in fact, the legislature, as, by comprising a majority of both houses, it was capable of carrying every question, that one excepted.—Others of your representatives, who had not, as yet, bartered away their independence, soon discovered that they were completely at the mercy of the junto; and, in order to recover the means of serving their constituents on those points of local interest, which, when combined, form the general weal, suffered themselves, one by one, to be bought over, until the faction had acquired nearly two-thirds of the whole number of votes, the strength requisite for carrying their favourite measure—without the accomplishment of which, they declared, they would not quit Vandalia.

They repeatedly tried their strength by preparatory resolutions, and at length, on the fifth of February, brought for-

ward the main question, but it was decided against them by a majority of two. They were not, however, to be so baffled;—they carried a vote of re-consideration, and the resolution was laid upon the table.

On the eleventh of February, having gained over the deficient votes by means which it might seem invidious to detail, the resolution was again brought forward, and *again lost* through the defection of a member, who, on the former occasion, had voted for it.—Notwithstanding this second decision, they persevered in their purpose.

One of the party, although in the constitutional minority on the last division, again moved a re-consideration of the question. The speaker declared the motion to be out of order, because the mover was in the minority. They attempted to over-rule the decision of the speaker, by an appeal to the house, but the chair was supported by a majority of three.

Here, it might be supposed, the question was finally decided, and would have been allowed to rest;—but it proved otherwise. On the succeeding day *the vote confirming the speaker's decision was reversed*, and the motion for re-consideration, made by one of the minority, *carried*:—and to extinguish the vote of the defaulter, and create a favourable one in the room of it, as no such vote could be found in the house, they had recourse to a proceeding the most unjust, and impudently tyrannical, that ever, as I believe, disgraced the legislature of a free country:—By an arbitrary resolution, in direct violation of law, they expelled one of your representatives, who had been established in his seat by the decision of the house, and introduced, in his room, a man favourable to their views, who had been declared, by the same decision, not to be a representative.—Having accomplished this, they brought forward the main question the third time, and *carried it* by the vote of this man, whom they created a member for the express purpose, at the close of the session.

Now, fellow citizens! I ask you how you feel under this sort of legislation? and the reply I seem to hear, from one end of the state to the other, is this—"We have been insulted and abused by a base faction; but, unless it be by the appointment of such men for our representatives, we are not, as yet, degraded. The infamy rests, at present, on the heads of these persons—and there let it remain! If we

should give our sanction to their conduct, by voting for a convention, at their instigation—then, indeed, would disgrace cover the country, and to be a citizen of Illinois will be no honourable distinction.”

This question having been thus forced upon the people, in defiance of law and constitution, our course, in regard to it, is plain:—We must, on the present occasion, vote against a convention, or become accomplices in these nefarious doings. There are, no doubt, various particulars in our institutions which require amendment, as, in the early stages of a government, will naturally be the case. It is new, and has hardly had a fair trial. At a proper season, when our *honest* representatives, after due deliberation, shall, by a constitutional majority, have resolved to propose it to us, let us then have a convention. The defects of the present system are not of a nature so urgent as to forbid a short delay, and we shall be the better qualified for a revision of the constitution from longer experience. A change in the county commissioners’ courts—the removal of the seat of government, and *annual* sessions of the legislature—are, I believe, the chief amendments talked of. If the objections to the thing, *as now proposed*, had no existence, it would be well for us to count the cost of a convention, and to consider, if, in the exhausted, and more than exhausted, the insolvent, state of the treasury, it would be discreet to add that expense to our present pecuniary embarrassment. In a few years it is probable we may better afford it; but, just now, the charge of the remedy, I do think, would be felt by the people a greater grievance than all the diseases complained of.

But the disease in the legislature demands our *immediate* attention; for there the interests of the publick have been bought and sold in the face of day; the law of elections, and the established rules of legislative proceedings, have been set at nought, in order to thrust this question upon us. Such a scene of base intrigue was never before exhibited under a representative government, as prevailed at Vandalia through the last session.

It cannot be for the interest or the honour of the citizens of Illinois that their affairs should be so conducted. Even if the object were beneficial, and should accord with our wishes, to receive it through so impure a channel, would be unworthy of republicans. When we require a convention, we can have one, according to the constitution, through a sound and

respectable legislature. We are not reduced to the humiliation of obtaining it by intrigue and chicanery, or of accepting it from hands which have violated our rights in the legislative assembly, their proper sanctuary! Though nugatory in point of law, as having been illegally and corruptly carried, this measure will become a precedent for similar abuses, if it receive the sanction of the people. Should the mines of Golconda be offered to us on these terms, we should reject the offer with disdain.—Such are, or ought to be, our reflections at this important crisis.

Injustice, committed by a private citizen, is bounded in its mischief by the nature of the act, and the perpetrator, being an object of contempt, is not likely to prejudice publick morals by the influence of example. Enormities are committed by despots in the wantonness of power, and the people submit until they acquire the means of avenging themselves; but, as they detest the tyrant, and abhor the tyranny, their sense of right may not be vitiated by the crimes of their rulers. But when a domineering faction, in a representative government, commits injustice, covering its deeds with the forms of legal enactment, a people, *conscious of these proceedings*, and submitting to them because they may chance to accord with their inclination or supposed interest, bows its neck to the yoke, and is unworthy to rank among republicans;—because, from that time, their government ceases to be a representative government. One faction, having accomplished its purpose, gives place to another, and that to a third—until it sinks into despotism of the meanest character; a tyranny of knaves, without honour or principle, or publick spirit! What that is worth preserving can remain alive under such a system?

“The end justifies the means,” say these lawless politicians, but it is a villainous plea, and would end in the destruction of our liberties. Would to heaven *that* were all the end they aim at! To it we should soon apply a remedy. Slavery is their avowed object,—accursed slavery! Doubly accursed—in those who inflict it, and in its miserable victims! When once introduced, for *this*, no remedy would be found.—My fellow citizens! for the sake of whatever we hold dear, and for the sake of our posterity—in the name of religion, in the name of virtue—I implore you to act uprightly at the ensuing election:—*Let us save our country!* not from the evil of political corruption merely, but from this, the concentration of all the evils which afflict humanity.

It is to you who have expended your labour and capital on permanent improvements, and considered yourselves settled for life in this state, with your families around you—that I have appealed thus earnestly, and I trust not in vain. There are others, and these form a large majority of the advocates of this scheme, who, like birds of passage, belonging to no country in particular, look only to the interest of the moment, and are prepared to vote for a convention as an inlet to slavery, under the notion that it might advance the price of land, and enable them to sell their farms to advantage, and *more off*. And there are persons,—as I have heard with sorrow and indignation,—whose talents and standing entitle them to consideration, who are availing themselves of this topic, so important to our future well-being, merely as an engine of temporary, party politics—Supposing (falsely as I believe and hope) that popularity is on the side of slavery, they take that side, and, regardless of its calamitous consequences, they can—just to gain an advantage over rivals, who are supporting the cause of freedom—prostitute their influence to the ruin of their country!—Such, I am told, is the position taken by some of the most prominent and zealous supporters of a convention; and thus, fellow citizens, may our dearest interests be trifled with by disappointed ambition, which, unless it can govern, will not hesitate to destroy!

From a sentiment of clemency or of kindness, I forbear naming either these individuals, or the leaders of the faction in the legislature. I arraign their proceedings at the bar of the public; but my controversy is with the measures, not with the men. This pamphlet, should it be circulated beyond the sphere of our contest, or survive its decision, shall not be the instrument of stamping with ignominy the memory of any of my fellow citizens. There may be extenuating circumstances,—infirmity of judgment, deeply-rooted prejudice, human weakness, in short, of various shapes, moral and intellectual, to save from absolute baseness of intention the projectors of enormous mischief. It is enough for us to see the actions in their true character;—we will leave the agents to settle the account of motives with their own conscience, and proceed to consider what would be the consequences of their success.

In regard to the price of land, no advantage *could* ensue from the admission of slavery. You might open the market to purchasers from the slave states, but, by so doing, you

would exclude all from every state and every country who are averse to slavery. The owners of negroes, who may be inclined to change their abode, have stronger inducements towards the southern states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana than to ours. This is confirmed by the experience of Missouri where the price of land is said to be even lower than with us and the difficulty of selling at least equal. The want of money, also, prevails equally in the neighbouring slave states, and is quite sufficient to prevent the sale of their own lands, which is necessary, in the first place, to enable them to remove at all. It is vain, therefore, to look to that quarter for many buyers; and it would surely be impolitic to confine the market to a class of purchasers who have not the means of purchasing, and if they had the means would not bring them to us, but would carry them farther south.

The exclusion of every other class for the sake of those who have neither the ability nor the inclination to buy, absurd as it would be, is not the only evil. Many more estates would immediately be offered for sale, so as to add to the glut in the market. For numbers, who had, as they hoped, made permanent homes for themselves and their families in this state, would hasten away at the approach of slavery, disposing of their property under every disadvantage; and thus, more sellers than buyers being created by this calamitous and foolish measure, the price of land would fall even below its present rate.

Let us now turn our thoughts to those who would be excluded by slavery, and we shall discover that they are far more numerous than those whom it would invite.

Multitudes of the farming class, and others, in the old countries of Europe. (from whence we all derive our origin,) are at this time driven by hard necessity to seek new homes. Their attention is drawn in a particular manner towards this state, as that section of the union best adapted to their views and habits. It has been represented to them, and they look to it, as a land of freedom; but if we make it a land of slaves they will not come here. "No matter," you may reply, "we want no English, or Scotch, or Irish, or Dutch settlers." But remember, they will bring *capital*; the farmers will buy your land, if you are disposed to sell: Those of other classes will establish manufactures and create a market for produce; and in due time they will all become, with their

children after them, as you are, American Citizens. A numerous class of purchasers from the eastern states, who are beginning to form a just estimate of the advantages of our prairie country, would also be excluded, as well as the friends of freedom in the slave states, numbers of whom would be likely to settle here if we retain our integrity.

Thus it is clear that the admission of slavery would operate most powerfully *against* that very interest which is the leading object with a majority of its advocates. It would throw many more farms on the market, and diminish instead of increasing the number of buyers.

But you, who have at heart the future prosperity of the state, as well as the interest of the present hour, let me entreat you to pause, and direct your views a little forward, before you allow temporary motives to bias your judgment towards any measure which may favour the admission of slavery into our republick.

Consider, that however small in number and contemptible in moral or physical power the negroes might be at their first introduction, they would increase in the natural course of population and by the accession of fresh supplies, in a much higher ratio than the whites; so that in a limited period they would become in our republican Illinois, the *many* who are doomed to labour for the *few*.

Between these two classes, under the most despotick governments, excluding slavery, there may and do exist various strong ties of a political and social nature. They slide into each other by insensible gradations, forming no line of absolute demarkation. They have sundry common interests. They have family connexions. Individuals are perpetually changing positions; the high are reduced by extravagance or misfortune; the low advance themselves by industry and enterprize. Therefore these classes are not naturally and of necessity hostile to each other. In peace they are friends, and fellow soldiers in war.

But in a nation composed of *free whites* and *negro slaves*, society, if it may be called such, is in a most deplorable condition. One portion of the people is separated from the other by an impassable barrier, in regard to all that binds man to man in social fellowship. They must not eat together, or pray together! There are no intermarriages. There is no change of position producing a common sympathy. One class possesses—all; the other—nothing. The laws are

made by one class and only known to the other by their partial severity. It is not a republick—this; it is a confederacy of tyrants, pure aristocratical despotism!

We may transfer the labours of cultivation to negroes, but there is a toil far more severe than the cultivation of the soil, commencing from the moment of their introduction, from which slavery cannot relieve us,—the toil of protecting the morals of our youth from contamination and our persons and property from natural and deadly foes, whom we admit into the heart of our concerns. We can transfer no part of this to the negroes. It will be all our own! It will “grow with their growth and strengthen with their strength” until at length even *their* condition may be enviable in comparison with ours. These are evils we cannot escape or mitigate; an incurable and increasing plague, in exchange for virtue, peace, and security, which no accumulation of property can ever compensate.

Consider the actual condition of the older slave states. South Carolina has just escaped a dreadful catastrophe; Virginia a few years ago also escaped. But the fire is still there, though smothered for a time under the ashes of former conflagrations. The sword remains over their heads, suspended by a single hair! Of this they are sensible; witness their painful precautions; the laws against the education of slaves; the arms and the barricadoed dwellings; witness the nightly patrols, pervading the country like an immense camp.—A dreadful inheritance is slavery,—even for those who inflict it!

There is no need to expatiate on the evils of slavery; they are too well understood in this country to require description. We all know—its advocates themselves know—that it comprehends every shade of crime, every degree of misery! And shall we, the free citizens of Illinois, hold forth our arms to embrace this monster? Shall we *invite* slavery with its train of crimes and calamities, and leave it a curse to our posterity, for the sake of a little present convenience—a little temporary, precarious profit?

If such be the case, as stated above, where slavery has been so long established as to have become like the natural order of things; here, on its *forced* introduction, our condition would be still more difficult and dangerous.

The slave holders of Illinois, would suffer under the unceasing consciousness that their lands were cultivated and their families surrounded, not by free and happy dependents, par-

taking of the general prosperity, but by degraded creatures, prone to theft and perhaps plotting their destruction. This they would suffer, in common with others. But the unspeakable abhorrence in which slavery is held by a great proportion of their fellow citizens, who took refuge in this state as an asylum from that calamity, would render it impossible to carry into effect the brutalizing system by which alone these devoted beings are kept down when their numbers become considerable.

Having founded our constitution on the inalienable rights of man, and entered into a compact with each other and with the general government that slavery shall not hereafter be introduced, it will be vain to urge its legality, although a short-sighted majority should obtain its admission. As well might they legalize robbery and murder!

Its introduction would always be felt by a very large part of the community as an invasion of their rights; they would view it as it stalked through the land, with a horror and impatient loathing as they would the intrusion of an armed foe. No laws on the subject could assuage the sense of injury in the minds of those persons, or repress the indignation they would experience on beholding their fellow creatures—bought and sold and trampled upon; no fears, as to consequences, could restrain them from the expression of their sentiments. Hence perpetual animosities and hatred would prevail between neighbours, destroying all social enjoyment, and that fellow feeling among the citizens which is essential to the general happiness and prosperity, would cease for ever.

A people, on assuming the exercise of its rights, may discover *wrongs* in its old institutions which it cannot redress without the hazard of still greater; or, the influence of custom, or of avarice, or of ignorance in a portion of the community, may prevent it.

Thus it was with the colonies on their emancipation from Great Britain. Among the institutions of their society there existed a *system of wrong*, which, for some, or all of the causes above assigned, was not redressed. That system was slavery. It was not actually tolerated by the constitution, or meant to be, as no exception in its favour appears. The evil was suffered to exist, *because it could not be destroyed*.

Under the sacred transcript of universal rights on which the people of the United States founded their constitution, if it had not pre-existed in the community, it could not have been

introduced; they could not have *created* slavery; nor can the people of Illinois *create* it for the same reason.

It is, moreover, expressly prohibited in this state, not only by our own compact above alluded to, but by the ordinance of Congress providing against its introduction into the North Western Territory or the states formed therefrom; which ordinance is the supreme law of the land, according to article 6 of the constitution of the United States which is as follows:

*"This constitution and the laws of the United States which shall be made in pursuance thereof, and all treaties made or which shall be made under the authority of the United States shall be the supreme law of the land, and the judges in every state shall be bound thereby, any thing in the constitution or laws of any state to the contrary notwithstanding."*

Those who settled in the Illinois, before it became a state, received a pledge from the Congress of the United States, in the ordinance of 1787, that slavery could not be introduced. When the constitution, in conformity with the ordinance, was accepted on that condition, others, in great numbers, repaired to this as a free state, and established themselves in it with entire confidence. They had selected for their abode, a country free, as they thought, from the pollution of slavery and by its constitution ever to remain so.

With this calamity, under which their existence would be a burthen, they are now threatened, and the mere apprehension throws a gloom over their prospects. What can the advocates of slavery *gain* by its introduction, to put in competition with the evil and injustice they would inflict upon these, their fellow citizens?

And is there, then, nothing fixed, nothing secure, in the foundation of our social compact? The blessings promised by a free constitution, can they be taken from us and the greatest of curses given in their room, because purblind avarice may have gained a temporary ascendancy? Were it an affair of interest merely, how opposite soever to my judgment, it might take its course. Having stated my opinion I could submit in tranquillity. But there are principles too sacred to be infringed even by a majority, on the plea of interest, or on any plea; and this is such a principle. To *alter* and *amend* the provisions of the constitution, is and ought to be the work of the majority, but not to *destroy* it.

We are a society of free men: Our fundamental laws know no such being as a slave. In this state, every inhabitant is free *by right*, derived from a power paramount to all majorities. Freedom is the basis of our social compact: a majority can regulate the institutions founded on this basis, but the basis itself is impregnable. Necessity, "the Tyrant's plea," in those states where slavery is established, supports the distinction of freeman and slave, a distinction abhorrent to reason, to religion, and to nature! Here we have no such plea, and our constitution admits no such distinction. If a majority have the power of affixing the brand of slavery on one portion of the community, where is the limit of this power? What portion is safe? What security remains for you or for me, if we chance to be in the minority?

I trust, fellow citizens, I am not mistaken in my estimate of your general good sense and honourable feeling. But if those persons whose proceedings in the legislature have caused this alarm, are, in fact, a representation of the majority, the friends of freedom have yet a strong hold in the vast majority of the people of the United States, of which we form a comparatively insignificant portion. To this great and enlightened community we have our final appeal; and if, to the indelible disgrace of this Government, such an appeal should be necessary, it *must be effectual*. In addressing you, I speak as a citizen of this particular section, confining my view to our own proper duty as regards this question.—We are also citizens of the United States, and, in that capacity, have our share in the compact between Congress and this state, at its admission. I refrain from discussing the validity of that instrument, in regard to both the contracting parties, not from the smallest doubt on the subject, but because it is for us to do our own business, and render a recourse to it unnecessary.

The annals of the republick afford no precedent of a people degrading themselves by reverting to slavery; a system which is the abhorrence of the civilized world, and acknowledged, by all, to be the bane of national prosperity and private happiness. In other states, the changes which have taken place have been on the side of freedom. And shall we, young as we are, cause the only blot, the only blurred page in the history of the Union?

Take a view of the states which have emancipated them-

selves, and compare them with the slave states: Look at the state of Ohio, and compare it with Kentucky. Here are experiments on a large scale for our instruction, so uniformly decisive against slavery, that, if it were an affair of simple calculation, a question of political arithmetick merely, common sense would teach us to reject it.

How the man of small property fares in a slave state I cannot describe from personal observation, but I have learned so much on the subject from those who have experienced it, that I presume no poor man of sound judgment and independent spirit *can* desire the introduction of slavery. To labour for his living among slaves, or to labour at all where the idea of slavery is so blended with labour as to communicate to it a something of disgrace, would be a sad exchange to a very large proportion of the citizens of this state, where labour is, as it ought to be, in high and honourable estimation, and the sure road to independence. I have heard that the condition of the poorer description of citizens in slave states is truly miserable: they are compelled to undergo much painful and degrading service in keeping down the slaves, for the protection of their wealthy neighbours, who form a sort of upper class—a set of lordly personages, who assume considerable state, and look down upon the industrious man who earns his living by the sweat of his own brow.—And a poor living it is that can be so earned in a slave country:—for, although it is demonstrable that slave labour is dearer, all things considered, than the labour of freemen, yet, where the former prevails, the latter is not in request;—so that, unless in the pitiful office of overseer or negro driver, the free labourer has not much chance of employment. Fellow citizens! you will reflect seriously on these things, and vote accordingly.

Let us now compare the actual wealth of a free state with that of a slave state, containing the same number of inhabitants, and possessing equal capital. Suppose the number to be 200,000, and half the population of the latter to be slaves. One hundred thousand negroes would be the first line of the account of national wealth with the advocate of slavery. His opponent would reply, that, as the wealth of a nation consists chiefly in the skill, strength, and industry of its productive population, the value of those individuals is not increased by their being slaves;—that the wealth of the state receives no addition in consequence of the produc-

live class being held as the property of the unproductive. But, admitting them to be property, he would allege, that one hundred thousand of the citizens in the free state, *the property of themselves*, are to be considered as *wealth* to the community, equal to that number of negroes in the slave state; and being more industrious and efficient as labourers, would place the balance greatly in favour of the free state.

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| Suppose the capital in each to be forty millions of dollars, it would consist, in the slave state, of a population of 100,000 Negroes, of all ages, at 200 dollars per head | \$20,000,000 |
| Other property                                                                                                                                                              | 20,000,000   |
|                                                                                                                                                                             | <hr/>        |
|                                                                                                                                                                             | \$40,000,000 |

|                                                                                                 |              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| In the free state it would consist of the property of 200,000 free persons                      | \$40,000,000 |
| 100,000 free persons valued at the same rate with 100,000 Negroes,                              | 20,000,000   |
| Extra value of the labour of a free population compared with a population of Masters and Slaves | *10,000,000  |
|                                                                                                 | <hr/>        |
|                                                                                                 | \$70,000,000 |

Thus it appears that, with equal capital and population, a free state is nearly twice as wealthy as a slave state.—But, in the materials of happiness—in moral riches—in the spirit pervading the community—how great is the contrast!

In the land of slaves there is despotic power, engendering pride and cruelty, fomented by avarice:—There is contempt of labour, encouraging indolence and its companions, dissipation and profligacy, on the one hand;—on the other there is brutal ignorance;—human forms, stripped of all that is estimable in human character: or, if aught remains of the nobility of man, it is that incurable hatred; that obstinacy not to be conquered by torture, and that thirst of vengeance,—which assume the place of virtues in the bosom of a slave, and convert him into a demon.

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\* The difference would be much greater; because the labour of the white population, in a slave state, is of little account: Free labour retires from slavery as silver from a base currency. The Overseers and a multitude of domestic slaves are also to be deducted; and, where negroes are numerous, it is labour enough for the whites to watch them.

In the free state, the vices inseparable from tyranny are unknown or strangled at their birth; the meanness, or the malignity, produced by oppression, have no place there. There man holds his proper station; he looks up to no superior but in virtue and knowledge—and down upon no abject dependent.

The contrast does not end here: Moral degradation has its re-action, and is not confined to the degraded class. The vices of the slave have their counterpart in those of the master. The female slaves, sunk below the restraints of moral decorum, and their honour deemed beneath the cognizance of law, become a nursery of vice in every family, and a general dissoluteness of morals is the consequence.—On the part of the whites this horror is superadded: they consign the fruits of their licentiousness to the miseries of perpetual bondage, and their own flesh becomes the object of unnatural and unhallowed traffick!

At what degree, on the scale of turpitude, shall we place the man who, knowing these things, can be induced by sordid interest, to place himself and his posterity, his neighbours and his country, in such a predicament? and, if a vote should carry the question, every man who holds up his hand in favour of a convention that should introduce it, may hereafter consider himself as the author of all the miseries and the crimes with which slavery would cover this fair portion of the globe.—If it fails, as I trust will be the case, he will then have to reproach himself with having been a partaker in the iniquity of the design.

The evils, moral and political, with which our fellow citizens of the slave states are afflicted, are not, let us ever bear it in mind, of their own creation: They were entailed upon them by the ignorance or the avarice of their predecessors, and permitted by the impolicy of the British government, which departed from its own principles in its colonial legislation.—We now stand, in regard to the state of Illinois, in the place of those early settlers of the old states from whom the curse of slavery has been handed down to posterity, and of that government which countenanced its establishment. But there is a difference between our position and theirs—in our favour, if we act justly, and to our accumulated disgrace, if otherwise. A century of bitter experience has exposed the abominations of the practice to the whole world; and we cannot now, as they might, avail ourselves of the

plea of ignorance.—In the present day, where is the man who will stand up in defence of the principle of slavery? Inured to it by education and habit, chained to their slaves as their slaves are chained to them, there are many truly respectable persons who yield to it as a matter of necessity, from which they see no way of escape, and they act as well as they can in their circumstances. Under the shelter of their example, others who are not of that character are labouring to spread the evil—and they merit the execration of all mankind for the attempt, whether they succeed or not.

The happiness of the slave, whose good fortune has given him a benevolent master, is brought forward in triumphant comparison,—not with the *happiness* of the freeman,—but with his sufferings when under the scourge of adversity;—and we are to admit, from this partial and false view of the subject, that slavery is preferable to freedom! The man whose heart remains uncorrupted by the possession of absolute power, is an honour to his kind. A society of such men would have little need of the restraints of law and government. But how rare is the virtue that is proof against circumstances so pre-disposing and impelling to vice! It raises its possessor greatly above the average of his fellows—Happy the slave, if slave he must be, who falls into such hands. Man is, however, at best, a frail creature, subject to caprice, and liable to error and imposition, and therefore not to be trusted so far: he is, moreover, mortal, and has not the means of transmitting his virtues, together with his slaves, to his descendants. How must the hand of the good man tremble, and his heart sink within him, when, at the close of life, he is about to commit to the power of a son, the reverse of himself, those defenceless beings whom he has soothed by his kindness into a forgetfulness of their bondage! Thus is slavery a thing to be rejected even in its mildest character.

Persons who do not defend the principle of slavery, have stated in defence of its extension into new countries, that diffusion of the black population is a mitigation of the evil. Without examining this argument, I shall merely observe, that, whatever may be its value, it does not apply to our case;—it is *not* the motive which operates on the advocates for slavery in this state, and supposing it were the motive, as they have no right to serve others at our expense, it cannot be admitted as an apology for the out-

rage they would inflict on their fellow citizens.—In the next place, if we admit that diffusion might, in a supposed case of crowded population, lessen the immediate pressure, that case has not yet been made out. Where slaves are most numerous, I believe, they are also at the highest price, and are not, therefore; likely to be transferred to a country where they are of less value. In the third place, the new states to the south, with the addition of Missouri, besides immense tracts of uncultivated lands in Georgia, Kentucky, &c. afford ample scope for the *diffusion* of slavery, without breaking faith with the United States, and the friends of freedom in Illinois; by admitting it here.—Therefore the argument, such as it is, has no relation to us. Yet, if the scheme of these benevolent diffusers of slavery included a plan for its gradual but certain and effectual abolition; their proposals would deserve attention. Their plan, on the contrary, tends to its indefinite continuance, as well as extension. In the licentiousness of assertion, which seems to be indulged on this subject beyond most others, as is natural where there is no basis for sound argument; it is added by reasoners, who ought to blush at the absurdity, that, *whilst diffusion mitigates the misery of slaves, it does not add to their number.* Are there fewer slaves in the five old slave-holding states than existed previous to the settlement of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Missouri? Was Europe, or even Africa, drained of inhabitants by peopling America? Those provinces of Spain which contributed most to the settlement of South America, increased in population beyond the rest of the kingdom. Has not the extension or *diffusion* of the general population, from thirteen states to twenty-four, increased the number of people in this republic? It is a fact established by experience that vacancies made by emigration are filled up by the stimulus of a more favourable proportion between the means of subsistence and the number of inhabitants; and whilst a population is created in a new country, the old country is relieved—and the effect of this relief, in giving a spring to population, is even greater than its numerical amount; so that the parent state becomes more populous by disseminating her offspring. Slave population increases according to the same law: if diffusion mitigates their sufferings, it increases

their number, and the room they leave behind them is soon filled up, as in other cases.

But such is the criminality of slavery, and so completely has that criminality been exposed, that it seems to me to be incumbent on all mankind who are blessed with freedom, to protest against the ordinances of the government which tolerates it, without providing for its abolition, and to make common cause in favour of their degraded brethren in every country. The principles of universal justice are clear, and the duty of resistance to oppression, engraven on every heart, is inseparable from the duty of aiding the weak who are unable to protect themselves. This would better merit the appellation of a *Holy Alliance* than a combination of sovereigns in support of Legitimacy. The very principle is now in operation, in regard to the African slave trade. Little more than twenty years ago, that commerce was sanctioned by the British government. Fifteen years have hardly elapsed since it was tolerated by the United States. It is now condemned as piracy by both these governments, and they have invited other nations to join them in the employment of force for its extirpation. The trade in slaves, in the interior of the United States, (in art. 1. sect. 9. of the constitution, veiled under the term "Migration"), was, together with the African slave trade, guaranteed against prohibition until the year 1808. The latter has been abolished and declared a capital offence; and if the principle and practice of the former were examined, they would be found to differ, not at all in kind, and but little in enormity. The time surely approaches when the virtue and intelligence, diffused through this republick, will no longer sustain the inconsistency of *tolerating the American slave trade, and punishing the African as felony!* I crave your indulgence for this digression, and shall now draw to a conclusion.

What think you, fellow citizens, is the compensation proposed by the persons who have, at the expense of reputation and integrity, made those extraordinary efforts for the admission of slavery? We have seen that it cannot favour the sale of land, but will have a contrary effect. We know that the pecuniary distress of the neighbouring slave states is greater than ours. Produce is so low as hardly to pay the charges of carrying it to market. The demand

of the old countries, in their present condition, is not equal to the superabundance of the new; and forcing cultivation, in the new countries, by the labour of slaves, is not likely to mend the matter. The natural and easy remedy for this inconvenience, (to call it an evil would be ingratitude) is, to create a market at home, by applying ourselves to manufactures. But slavery would *increase the embarrassment*, and *obstruct the operation of the remedy*. To what motives, then, can their zeal be imputed, except the love of arbitrary power, and aversion to industry—and, with a few ambitious characters, political rivalry?

The following positions have, I think, been fully established: That a convention, held in pursuance of the measures described, would be unconstitutional and illegal, and therefore of no just authority;—because it has not been proposed to the people by a constitutional majority of their representatives, but was, on the contrary, twice negatived by such a majority:

That the admission of slavery would increase our present difficulties, by lowering the price of land and produce—and would be destructive of the future prosperity of the state, and happiness of the people, especially of that very numerous class of citizens who are possessed of but small property, and whose wealth consists in their industry:

That it cannot be introduced but by breaking down the barriers of law and justice—which are, I trust, on too firm a basis to be disturbed by the intrigues of a corrupt faction. You will therefore agree with me—that we are bound by honour, interest, and duty, to vote, at the approaching election, for **NO CONVENTION**.

I was just laying down my pen, when I recollected a strange sentiment entertained by some persons, who, having been brought up among slaves, have not reflected much on the nature of true liberty—that we are not free, because our constitution prohibits slavery—that this country, governed by laws of our own making, where every man, unless he be a criminal, is as free as another, is not a free country—in fine, that the state of Illinois is not a free state, because we have decreed that none but freemen shall inhabit it!—According to their opinion, if part of the people held the other part in bondage, could buy and sell them, and goad them to labour like cattle, *then* it would be a free country. But freedom, if it exists in reality,

extends to all,—it is the right to do every thing but injury, and the enjoyment of protection from being injured. Without this restraint, on the one hand, and this protection on the other, liberty is an empty sound. Difference of colour makes no difference in the nature of oppression, or in the crime of inflicting it; and that only is a free country where every man in it is protected from oppression.

In this happy and most honourable condition, of equal freedom and protection, we, the citizens of Illinois, now stand. It is the first rank of human society—the last and meanest is that of *Master* and *Slave*, to which the transactions of an unconstitutional majority are intended to degrade us.—For myself I submit to no such humiliation. To me and mine the entrance of slavery would be the signal of departure, and to many others. It would be a sentence of banishment to us, of exclusion to countless thousands, and, to those who remain, of irretrievable debasement.

To ward off this most calamitous result, I confide, fellow citizens, in your integrity and good sense; for I think you will, on considering the subject, join me in opinion that the principles of justice and humanity, in this case as in all others, are the principles of wisdom—and that cold-hearted, selfish politicians are the greatest fools upon earth.

M. BIRKBECK.



## POSTSCRIPT.



At sun-rise on this Fourth of July, 1823, when the prairies and the woods are resounding with peals of triumph, I address the following serious expostulation to the attention of my fellow-citizens, as my part in the service of this festive day.

The practice of slavery, by a people exulting in their own freedom, is a melancholy instance of human depravity or inconsistency, and shows how we may become reconciled, by custom, to the deliberate perpetration of the greatest injustice.

The right to hold a man or a woman in bondage can only arise from forfeiture of liberty by the individual so held; but it is impossible that this forfeiture can extend to their posterity. For example, should slavery, by the will of the majority, be introduced among us we could only put it in practice, justly, upon the persons of criminals, who had so forfeited their freedom, under the laws of that society from which we procured them, and of this fact we must obtain irrefragable testimony.

Supposing any number of these wretched outcasts, of both sexes, to be received by us and employed on our plantations; what sort of claim could we set up against their children? Could the united votes of all the citizens in the state consign a single infant to bondage because its parents had committed crimes and suffered the penalty? The child born of these parents would have the same natural rights with our own children; the same indefeasible inheritance from nature "of life, of liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" and would have an additional title to kindness and protection from the unfortunate circumstances of his birth. What would be the course of justice in regard to such children? Their parents having no political rights, they would be received as orphans into the arms of a virtuous and honourable society: they would be the children of the publick, and be treated with that tenderness to which the orphan has an irresistible claim from every human being with a heart uncorrupted.

No.—fellow-citizens!—all the power of the community, directed to this single point, could not extend the right of slavery beyond the individual who has forfeited his freedom

In regard to *emigration*, we should probably exclude *ten* by slavery for *one* that it would bring in.

If we expect *money* we must not look to the slave holders, for they will bring only negroes: whereas emigrants from the east or from Europe all bring money, more or less.

If we wish to sell *land* the difference is still in favor of a free emigration. The slave owner will purchase from Congress; eastern or European emigrants are more likely to buy improvements.

*Produce* would be lowered in price by the introduction of slavery; because slave holders with their negroes are all producers. Other emigrants will be partly consumers, who by introducing manufactures and dollars to be expended in labour, will create a home market for produce and increase the price.

So that in every view in which we can place it, independent of moral considerations, slavery would be against our interest. But, if all the arguments of a temporary and inferior interest were as much on the side of slavery as they are opposed to it, what are they in comparison with the miseries and abominations which are its inseparable companions?

M. BIRKBECK



